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FM AMCONSUL ISTANBUL
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6471
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 002174

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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/26/2016

TAGS: PGOV PREL TU

SUBJECT: CHP - DRIVE TO PREVENT ERDOGAN PRESIDENCY

REF: A. ANKARA 6723

1B. ISTANBUL 2169

Classified By: CG Deborah K. Jones for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary. People's Republican Party (CHP) Istanbul Chairman Sinasi Oktem told us December 20 that Prime Minister Erdogan could not "in good conscience" take the prescribed presidential oath of office and vowed CHP would do everything possible to prevent that from happening -- unless "you (i.e., the U.S.) save him." Accusing the U.S. of causing 60 deaths a day in Iraq, Oktem called for quitting Iraq as soon as possible. He said the 12-year closure of CHP following the 1980 military coup had a major impact on the party, implying it was no longer the party founded by Ataturk, while emphasizing the party's continued commitment to the founding principles of the Republic as pro-western and pro-enlightenment, in contrast to the current "feudal trend."
End summary.

"ERDOGAN CAN'T BE PRESIDENT!"

12. (C) Declaring the CHP firmly against the Prime Minister or anyone he names as President of Turkey, CHP Istanbul Branch Chairman Oktem termed defeating this possibility the party's single-minded goal for the coming months. So far, the Republic had protected democracy, he asserted; now it is time for democracy to protect the Republic. Democratic, secular, pro-western and enlightenment principles must continue to guide Turkey and PM Erdogan knows he cannot in good faith and sincerity take the constitutionally-prescribed oath of office because "he doesn't hold those values." The CHP aims for elections in April, Oktem continued, because it was not legitimate for a government elected by only 24% of eligible voters to name the next president in the final year of its mandate "just because the rules say so." The press campaign to get CHP members of parliament to quit en masse in order to force early elections won't work, he said, because MPs need the permission of the whole of parliament to resign.
(Reftel A) This option is not possible or practical, he opined, "but we're looking at all the options."

13. (C) Warming to his theme, Oktem said the tool devised thus far to prevent an Erdogan presidency is "public pressure through democratic means." On the assumption that 75% of the public opposes Erdogan's presidency, the plan is to "wake the sleeping giant" of workers, students and others. CHP is considering marches, protests and even strikes and road blocks to bring mass opinion to the streets as a means of influencing the firmly entrenched AKP. There is no detailed plan, he said, but if CHP can get the ball rolling, the social movement could snowball and make it clear to AKP they could not name the next president. Asked about AKP's alleged use of precinct workers to energize its base, Oktem said CHP

was open to using any means -- but clearly no other party has nor claims such an extensive apparatus.

¶14. (SBU) Those opposing an AKP-inspired presidency could draw on the "huge public reaction" against an EU accession process that demeaned Turkey, claimed Oktem. That said, he acknowledged that CHP's constituency was limited to the urbanized and educated middle class; the generally, poor, recent arrivals in cities, even those who'd enriched themselves through advantageous land deals based on legal loopholes, remained outside the CHP's electoral sphere. The party was still looking for ways to draw them in.

CHP: POLICY AND VISION

¶15. (C) Asked about CHP's economic policy, Oktem said it was to reduce unemployment. The question remains whether an oft-repeated criticism of high unemployment finds traction among the new urbanites that Oktem acknowledges do not vote for CHP. On foreign affairs, Oktem advocated a Turkey "equal to and independent of" all other nations - "not the way Turkey acted today," he said, clearly alluding to the EU process. The United States, he declared, must leave Iraq as soon as possible; the effort there was pointless, useful neither to the region nor the Iraqi people and causing the deaths of 60 persons a day. The U.S. should either get fully involved abroad and solve the problem or else stay away. If in doubt, the U.S. should never intervene. If the U.S. wanted to do something truly useful, it should solve the Palestinian/Israeli conflict.

¶16. (C) Asked if CHP were still the party of Ataturk's vision, Oktem offered an unexpected, albeit candid reply. Describing the party's closure from 1980 until 1992 following

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the military coup, Oktem said significant shifts had taken place in Turkey during those years. In CHP's first election after its 1992 reconstitution, it garnered 4.6% of the national vote. Other Social Democratic parties had formed in Turkey, some soon fading away, one joining CHP temporarily and then splitting away again. Though CHP claimed to have an 80-year tradition, the closure and resulting turmoil had made a major impact on the party. But he said, a "real party" has existed for at least ten years out of government; AKP had yet to have this experience -- they would not survive this length of time out of power as CHP had.

¶17. (C) Comment. CHP clearly has yet to figure out how to reach the masses it wants to move in Turkey. On the one hand, it would welcome votes from those recently arrived urban dwellers, but is short on vision for reaching them. Lacking anything vaguely approaching AKP's substantial electoral machine, the party will find it difficult to implement a strategy of massive protests ahead of a presidential vote in parliament, short of crude appeals to Turks' meaner side of nationalism and prejudice -- an approach thus far notable for its lack of success. While the obligatory hot "cay" was offered and accepted, it barely warmed the frost in the room which grew icier with the discussion of Iraq. Perhaps not knowing how otherwise to deal with a dominant AKP, rumored to enjoy tacit U.S. support, CHP leadership, in contrast to the leanings of some of its maverick sons (reftel B), has chosen to exploit the demonizing myths of American omniscience and ill intent.

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